



# From the Arab Spring to the Chinese Winter: The Institutional Sources of Authoritarian Vulnerability and Resilience in Egypt, Tunisia and China

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Tunisian protesters in January 2011. Source: Moises Saman, *New York Times*

## Introduction

Beginning with the cases of Egypt and Tunisia, this project critically examines recent literature identifying the causes of the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions and offers an alternative explanation centering on the political opportunities for national-level popular contention presented by these regimes' centralized and decentralized state structures.

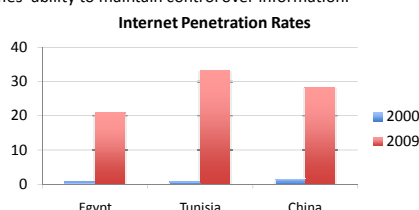
## Authoritarian Capacity

After the Arab Spring, many commentators have argued that China's superior "capacity" has insulated it from popular challenges where Tunisia and Egypt's did not. This capacity involves:

**1. An effective coercive apparatus**, capable of silencing and intimidating potential opponents, is essential to a regime's resilience.

In recent decades, Tunisia, Egypt and China have all invested heavily in mechanisms of media control and internal security forces trained and equipped for non-lethal crowd dispersal, enhancing their coercive capacities.

Moreover, the increased diffusion of social media technology has challenged all three regimes' ability to maintain control over information.



**2. Discretionary control over the economy**, which enables regimes to distribute rewards to supporters and starve opponents.

In all three regimes, market reforms over the last several decades have relaxed state discretionary control over the economy.

**3. A highly-institutionalized political party** helps a regime maintain internal cohesion in the face of popular challenges from below.

In an effort to mirror the stability of the Chinese Communist Party and other long-lived autocracies, the Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes institutionalized their regimes by establishing hegemonic ruling parties and using elections to recruit emerging elites, manage internal factionalism and distribute rents and offices to loyalists.

## Social Drivers of Unrest

Others have suggested the bottom-up drivers of discontent in Egypt and Tunisia: a large youth bulge, socioeconomic inequities, and official corruption have made national level popular uprisings more likely than in China.

As the result of the one child policy, **China's youth bulge has been comparably small** (45.3% under 30), whereas Tunisia and Egypt's (56.1% and 62.7%).

**Variation in unemployment has been less clear.** In Tunisia and Egypt, official unemployment in 2005 had reached rates of 14.2% and 11.2%. China's official 4.1% is much lower, but other estimates have measured actual unemployment in the PRC as high as 14.0% or 20.0%.

**Inequality rates in China have recently actually begun to exceed those in the Arab world.** In 2001, Egypt's GINI index for the distribution of family inequality was reported at 34.4 (90<sup>th</sup> most unequal of 136 countries), whereas Tunisia's was estimated a 40.0 (61<sup>st</sup>) in 2005 and China reported 41.5 (52<sup>nd</sup>) in 2007.

According to the 2010 Corruptions Perceptions Index (CPI), **corruption in China has paralleled that in Egypt and Tunisia.** Pew Forum's Global Attitudes Project (2008) and *The China Survey* (2008) have indicated that large majorities (78% and 67.5%) average citizens consider official corruption to be a serious problem.

**These drivers have contributed to spiraling unrest in China.** As reported by the Ministry of Public Security, "mass incidents" in the country increased from 10,000 in 1994 to 87,000 in 2005, with some accounts suggesting the number had accelerated to 180,000 by 2010.



If variation on measures of capacity and social drivers of unrest is unclear, what intervening factors might help explain China's enduring resilience to nationwide unrest and regime breakdown?

## The Missing Variables: Centralization and Modes of Contention

With the limited variability of between capacity and social driver-based factors in in these three cases, why has China not seen regime stabilizing national protests similar to the Arab Spring?

**The decentralized structure of the Chinese state has opened political opportunities for localized collective actions targeted at particular, community-specific targets while closing opportunities and the demand for coordinated cross-regional collective actions in the mode of the Arab Spring.**

**Fiscal and administrative decentralization:** Compared to Tunisia and Egypt, where subnational governments respectively controlled 12.1% and 15.6% of all government expenditures, in China, an average of 54.84% of fiscal expenditures were spent at the subnational level from 1995 to 1998.

**Coercive decentralization:** As noted by Cai (2008) and others, responsibility for managing social unrest has been delegated to local officials in China not left to centralized internal security forces as seen in Egypt and Tunisia.

By granting local officials greater authority within their jurisdiction to distribute resources and manage unrest, the center avoids blame for local authorities' performance and their use of repression. Consequently, local officials and parochial issues become the focus of contentious actions, and claimants develop repertoires of contention and bases of support that are conducive to local and particularized but not national, anti-system modes of action.

Full references available at: <http://bridgeport.academia.edu/SteveHess>